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Book Notices

TAMMUZ AND ISHTAR

For more than two thousand years "Chaldean" has been synonymous with "astrologer, wise man," and the scholars who set about to recover the wisdom of the East were not surprised to find incantations, oracles, omens, and the like, prominent features in the religion of the Babylonians and Assyrians. After studying the *Maqlû*, *Shurpu*, *Udugûl*, and similar series of texts, the student was likely to conclude that magic played the chief part in this religion. While it was recognized that these documents date from the later days of Assyrian and Babylonian history, it was assumed that most of them went back to Sumerian originals. On the other hand, the hymns and prayers of this later period, many of them in the Sumerian tongue with Semitic interlinear translations, were evidence of another and brighter side of the religion and warned against a too hasty conclusion as to the part magic played in the older cults. Only recently, however, has it been possible to give serious attention to the study of the religious texts dating from Sumerian days. The foundations of the Sumerian grammar and lexicon had to be laid before any substantial progress could be made in this field. One of the most industrious students of this literature is Professor Langdon who has given excellent translations of many Sumerian hymns and liturgies in his *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms* and *Babylonian Liturgies*. Another work from his pen is concerned with the Ishtar-Tammuz cult.¹ The author has diligently searched the literature for the materials upon which to base his theory of the development of the religion of the Sumerians, and reaches the conclusion that the cult of the mother-goddess Ishtar and the dying and rising son Tammuz comes first, not only in point of time, but also in importance in that religion. According to the preface, "these pages represent a reaction against the trend of Assyriological interpretation of Sumero-Babylonian religion, which has hitherto emphasized the magical side of this religion in a way wholly out of proportion to its purer ceremonies and deeper theology. . . . Abundant evidence is now in the hands of scholars, which shows that the daily liturgies of the Sumerians were wholly free from magic and admirably adapted to foster the highest aesthetic ideals of mankind."

The reviewer ventures to believe that in spite of the many and important facts which the author has gathered together in this work, it will receive much adverse criticism because of the method of approach.

¹ *Tammuz and Ishtar*. By Stephen Langdon. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1914. Pp. vii+196 and 6 plates. 10s. 6d.

The scholar who would write upon the religion of the Sumerians and Babylonians, or of any other people, is practically limited to two methods of interpretation. The first, that of the comparative mythologists, seeks to trace the myths and cult-practices of a people back to first principles, and usually professes to find that polytheism, polydemonism, magic, etc., are the result of devolution from an original monotheism. As a rule, all cults are found to be astral in origin. This method has certainly been losing ground rapidly before that of the folk-psychologist who fails to find any profound philosophy or tendency toward monotheism in the thinking and religion of primitive peoples. In fact, these scholars are not sure that man started out with any religion at all. They feel certain, however, that all the facts point to an evolution from vague conceptions of powers which might help or harm man, and magical practices by means of which man sought to gain the favor of, or render harmless, these powers; through polydemonism and polytheism, with a host of cult practices which were reinterpreted (through the myth) from time to time as their original meaning became obscure; to monotheism and ethical religion.

That Langdon follows the first method of interpretation will be seen from a quotation or two from the beginning of his book. "It would not be venturesome to affirm that this mystic cult of death and resurrection is one of the earliest forms of worship known to us, and so far as our sources permit us to speak, precedes the lower form of incantation and magic. Theological speculation, accompanied by a corresponding tendency to asceticism and mysticism, apparently preceded certain grosser types of magic to which the frailty of man so often inclines in the later stages of a given culture" (p. 3). "Sumero-Babylonian theology rests upon a theory of emanations; they supposed, as did the Egyptians, their contemporaries, that the union of heaven, the male principle, and the earth, the female principle, gave rise to a series of forms or degrees of material things which finally resulted in an ordered world. The original first principle (called *an*, "heaven") and the various emanations are regarded as containing in themselves power of self-creation; they are both male and female. Not until the devolution reaches the minor personifications of nature, as the sun, moon, storm, grain, and fire, do we find a sharp line of demarcation between male and female deities. . . . It is true that in practice we find the god of heaven and the goddess of heaven, the god of earth and the goddess of earth, but it is highly probable that the first concepts of deity were absolutely genderless, the masculine element perhaps predominating" (pp. 3, 4).

How deities could be absolutely genderless and still perhaps have the masculine element predominating is difficult to imagine. However, Langdon goes on to say that while this theology of genderless divinities was very primitive in Babylonia, "it was probably developed by the Sumerians from a more natural theology" (p. 4). He believes that the Sumerians probably adopted mother earth as the first deity and soon developed the idea of "a

divine son who suffers death and returns to life" (p. 8). And so, "since the worship of the mother-goddess and her son evidently forms the earliest element in human religion, at any rate in the Sumerian religion, we should conclude that, as the Book of Genesis asserts, man began to worship God and to found a social state in Mesopotamia" (p. 6). Furthermore, "the strongest evidence is at hand for supposing that the first deity worshipped by this most ancient of peoples was mother earth under the specific name, 'Goddess of the vine'" (p. 7). Since the vine is not indigenous to Mesopotamia (according to Langdon), he concludes that the Sumerian people brought this goddess with them from their more ancient home in the highlands of Central Asia, before 6000 B.C. (pp. 7f.).

This is the author's starting-point. He then proceeds with his investigation, "departing from the certain prehistoric situation, namely, that the Sumerian people brought with them to the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates the worship of Geshtinanna (the vine-goddess) and her brother Tammuz" (p. 44). And then, "at a time almost prehistoric the Semites invaded Mesopotamia, bringing with them the cult of Byblus. In Semitic religion the mother-goddess is invariably the mother of the youthful god, not the sister" (p. 50).

Having thus accounted for the origin of the mother-goddess and her brother (or son), Langdon holds that "it is probable that the gods of the numerous cities of Babylonia and Assyria, whatever may have been their special attributes acquired in later times, are at the beginning, each and all, shadows of this young god"¹ (p. 28). So we are told that Ningirsu and Ningishzida of Lagash were nothing but special aspects of this god (p. 30). Soon Ningirsu is referred to as "that parasite god."² In like manner our author would regard most of the goddesses of the Babylonian pantheon as specialized forms of the mother-goddess. After the entrance of the Sumerians into Mesopotamia they observed "how life depended upon the rise and fall of the two rivers" and Mother Vine-Stalk "now appears as Ninâ, a name which means 'Queen of the waters'" (p. 44). Once settled in the agricultural lands of Sumer, they "connected mother earth with corn, barley, and reeds. A new type of virgin goddess, Nidaba, now appears, who like Ninâ soon became an independent deity" (p. 149). Apparently the history of the rest of the "Ishtars" was similar to that of Ninâ and Nidaba.

There can be no doubt about the attractiveness of such a theory of the origin and development of the Sumero-Babylonian religion. But, like the equally attractive theory of Darwin, it is too simple. Just as Darwinism has had to be modified from time to time to make room for new, and frequently bothersome, facts, so it is likely that any theory of the development

¹ Tammuz.

² Cf. also p. 98, where Langdon reaches the conclusion that "Ajā is another one of those parasite goddesses . . . who incorporates one of the manifold aspects of the great Innini."

of the Sumero-Babylonian religion will need to be modified as our knowledge of that religion, and of religion in general, grows. In the interests of truth, such a theory must be put to the test at every point. It is the object of this review to inquire into the validity of some of Langdon's conclusions.

First of all, let us take up the categorical assertions that "the nourishing life of earth, warmed by the sunshine . . . furnished the prehistoric Sumerians of Central Asia with their first god," that "this deity who fostered all life was conceived of as a mother, unbegotten, genderless, producing animal and vegetable life as a virgin," and, since "primitive peoples do not think in abstract terms," they "conceived the earth-goddess under that form of life with which they were most familiar" and called her "Mother Vine-Stalk" (p. 43).

Waiving any discussion of the Athanasian epithets applied to the mother-goddess, let us inquire into the reasons for assuming that Mother Vine-Stalk was her original form. There seem to be two such reasons: (1) the occurrence of the name Mother Vine-Stalk as applied to Ishtar, in the hymns and liturgies, and (2) the alleged fact that the vine is not indigenous to Mesopotamia. Therefore, Mother Vine-Stalk must go back to a time before the entrance of the Sumerians into Mesopotamia (*ca.* 6000 B.C., according to the author). But what evidence have we that the vine is not indigenous to Mesopotamia? What do we know about the flora of Mesopotamia before 6000 B.C.? Do we know with any degree of certainty that the Sumerians came from the highlands of Central Asia? And if it should turn out that this was the case, how does Langdon know that Mother Vine-Stalk was their first and only (so it would seem) goddess? Who knows how many gods and goddesses the Sumerians may have worshiped and discarded in their early home, wherever this may have been? How do we know that they waited until they came to Sumer before they discovered corn-goddesses or a "queen of the waters"?

In a word, the whole difficulty with Langdon's hypothesis lies in the fact that it assumes that religion must have been the result of the apprehension of one great principle such as the self-renewing power of vegetable life. It is true, the author insists that primitive peoples do not think in abstract terms; hence to the Sumerians "the grape vine appears to have been the plant which appealed to them as most efficiently manifesting the power of the great mother" (p. 43). But this is putting the cart before the horse. For, if there is anything which the study of religion has demonstrated, it is the fact that such generalizations as an earth-goddess, or mother earth, are the result, not the origin, of a belief in a host of spirits or powers which were supposed to dwell in the corn, in the fruit trees, in fields or streams, hills or mountains, or in out-of-the-way places. Therefore, on the basis of our knowledge of primitive religions the world over, we may, nay, are forced to, assume that the corn-goddess, Nidaba, or the "queen of the waters," Ninâ, and a host of "Ishtars" existed side by side from time immemorial, and that,

because of the rise to prominence of this or that city-state, or because of theological speculation, one or the other of these goddesses became identified with, or absorbed, others, and in this way a great mother-goddess arose. That such a development was in full swing at the time represented by our earliest documents seems evident. But we must bear in mind that the building and votive inscriptions of the Sumerian period (before the Hammurabi Dynasty) are full of references to Ninâ, Innini, Bau, Gatumdug, Nidaba, and other goddesses, while the name of Mother Vine-Stalk occurs only twice, once as Ama-geshtin (in a tablet of Urakagina) and once as Geshtin-anna (on the statue of Ur-Bau). Furthermore, as Langdon himself admits, by far the commonest epithet of the mother-goddess was "queen of heaven, *gashan-anna* or *nin-anna*." The name Geshtin-anna is rare in the old hymns, and not common in the late (Assyrian and Babylonian) versions. Langdon himself admits (p. 57, n. 2) that this divinity (Geštin) survived only as the sister of Tammuz, the position of consort being exclusively reserved for the mother Innini.¹ It seems, therefore, purely arbitrary to speak of Mother Vine-Stalk as the original Sumerian deity.

Langdon has much to say about the theological speculation of the Sumerians and Babylonians, and yet, while it is true that there is abundant evidence of such speculation, it seems to the reviewer that the author has read infinitely more theology into the Sumero-Babylonian hymns and liturgies than they contain. Much of what is said about *an* as the "first principle, heaven," and *anna*, "heavenly, partaking of the nature of *An*, father heaven," does not seem to rest upon any sound exegesis of the sources. In fact, Langdon is compelled to explain away the obvious meaning of *ana* (in *gašan-ana*) as given by the Semitic translation (*Ištar*)-*šaḫat* (p. 88, n. 4).

In like manner, the reviewer believes, Langdon has gone entirely too far in his efforts to establish the purity of the ancient cults as over against those of later days. While it is true that the large majority of the "magical" texts are of comparatively late date, it does not follow that the older religion was free from magical practices. Langdon's discussion of the title, *nin-en*, *nin-en-na-ge*, "lady of incantation" (pp. 45 f.) would be sufficient evidence to the contrary, did we not possess other evidence.

In conclusion: In view of the numerous passages in the religious texts, in particular, the *Ištar*-Tammuz texts, the meaning of which still eludes our grasp, is it not fair to inquire whether generalizations such as are found in the work under discussion are not premature?

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¹ Cf. also p. 53, n. 4.